

Strength in Numbers

Family Support and Depression

When a loved one is suffering from depression, the support of friends and — most importantly — of family is crucial in their recovery and return to well-being. The most important thing any family member can do for the depressed person is to offer emotional support. This involves listening without judging, and demonstrating understanding, patience, affection, and encouragement. The second most important thing is to help him or her get an appropriate diagnosis and treatment. If you are the spouse or guardian, and play the role of primary care-giver for the family member suffering from depression, your role is the most crucial of all. Some suggestions for successfully managing your role include:

Be Realistic: Understand that depression won't just go away on its own or be 'cured' overnight. Your help, and the commitment of the rest of your family, must be there for the long term. Treatment, which usually consists of behavioral therapy and/or antidepressant medication, requires a dedicated, ongoing effort. Keeping your expectations — and the expectations of the depressed family member — realistic means you both realize that neither is perfect or able to satisfy every need of the other.

Keep Communicating: Sharing intimate feelings, desires, and hopes in any relationship can be challenging, and the added dimension of coping with depression can lead to additional mistrust, anger, and frustration. Don't be afraid to keep your lines of communication open. Look for ways to solve problems as a team, and make sure the person suffering from depression knows you are there for them for the long haul. Balance the needs of the depressed family member with needs of your own, and don't work against each other.

Don't Take It Personally: The effects of depression can put even the healthiest relationships to the test. As couples or families try to cope with depression, family roles and interactions change, and financial status, social and work routines can be disrupted. Remember that the actions of a family member suffering from depression result from depression, and are not aimed against you or the family personally. Keep in mind that mixed feelings are common in those battling depression, but focus on the goal of wellbeing for the depressed family member.

Don't Forget About Yourself: It's a natural tendency for a caregiver to focus all of his or her efforts and attention on the person suffering from depression. However, when that happens the caregiver's own life can suffer dramatically. Try to make sure that your needs are being met. You're not being selfish when you ask for help from other family members, friends, or support groups. When the depressed person isn't feeling like a burden to you, it will benefit you both. Dealing with depression requires ongoing effort, and the more help you have, the better will be your results.

For family members in general, the following tips can provide a useful framework for assisting in the depressed person's recovery:

- Acknowledge that the family member is suffering from a real illness and that getting better is a priority for everyone
- Understand that depression can change the family member's behavior, and that he or she may at times have a negative outlook
- Don't ignore remarks about suicide. Report them to the depressed person's therapist
- Recognize that all family members must adjust to new responsibilities, both inside and outside the household

- Set a good example for the depressed family member and others by avoiding alcohol and tobacco, and eating a healthy, balanced diet, and exercising regularly. A healthy body is more resistant to mental and physical illnesses.
- Don't accuse the depressed person of faking illness or of laziness, or expect him or her "to snap out of it." Eventually, with treatment, most people do get better. Keep that in mind, and keep reassuring the depressed person that, with time and help, he or she will feel better.
- Invite the depressed family member out for walks, to the movies, and other activities. Be gently encouraging if your invitation is refused. Encourage participation in activities that once gave pleasure, such as hobbies, sports, religious or cultural activities, but do not push the depressed person to undertake too much too soon. The depressed person needs diversion and company, but too many demands can increase feelings of failure.

Depression is a real illness that afflicts nearly 20 million people in the United States each year. With proper treatment, and the support of a dedicated family, the chances of recovery are very good.

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